

Sam: In your opinion, how common is it to get extended time on these exams?

Mercer: That's a good question. So, it's weird, it's like in some ways I would say it's pretty difficult to get [extended time]. I used to work as a school counselor at a private school doing college counseling where the accommodation process is, 99.9 percent of the time has to kind of go directly through the high school that the student attends. So, the school counseling personnel have their hands in that quite a bit, in a positive way, I don't mean manipulating or anything like that. What I mean is, it's from that experience that I saw the standards, the paperwork, the thoroughness, the time required to...you know... once that paperwork even gets submitted there's quite a bit of time either at the CollegeBoard, like the SAT's, or ACTs....

[breaks to take other call]

Ok, sorry about that.

No problem.

So, anyway, I saw up close, or fairly up close, I wasn't at the CollegeBoard or at the ACT getting the paperwork, but I was always left...and this was, you know, not so long ago, I was left with a very strong impression based on those observations that it's not easy to get the accommodations. It's not just a simple ask, there's quite a few steps, there's work that the family needs to put into getting testing done. I experienced that at a private school so we didn't provide the testing, I don't know if....at various public high schools around the country there may be different kinds of accommodations that they provide for that kind of testing, which can be expensive. I don't

know if that is provided [at public high schools], that might be something to look in to. But [the testing] tends to be pretty expensive and then [the psychologists] have to come to you and fill out the paper work, then the school has to fill out paperwork. The reason I'm saying all those steps made it hard, I mean those are just somewhat administrative and the spending of money. The other part that I felt was pretty thorough was that the CollegeBoard or the ACT put a pretty high premium on not just 'do you have paperwork that says you should have accommodations from a doctor?', but did this kid have accommodations at the school previously? Meaning [the testing companies] kind of had their radar up, like, if you just all of a sudden decide "hey, let's go get a test and get a doctor to write something that says, 'you need accommodations'". I don't mean like a doctor's note, I mean like a full thorough type of psychoeducational evaluation that's usually 25 pages long with many, many tests [that are] administered by a qualified educational psychiatrist. [The psychoeducational report] has very detailed results on a whole number of things. Once you have that, you also have to kind of establish that the student was using accommodations at the school previously because if the student wasn't having accommodations then the CollegeBoard's reasoning, often not always, was well, 'it's fine that you have a doctor that says you maybe now need them, but why didn't you need them before now at school and you were doing ok? You don't need them. Your fine, we don't see how this would make a difference because you haven't been using them up until now.' So, I don't want to get into too much of the details. My impression is that its thorough. Now, on the other hand, I'm not naïve, I understand that somethings going on there. Is it the WSJ? Somebody, right? More than one outlet recently published that there were some pretty clear patterns in these upper middle-class areas, that there are some people in these pretty affluent areas lying about this. Yeah, I see that. I see that. I had a student at a really great independent private school who I'm working with whose

honest and hardworking and is just a good normal student, right? With great values and, you know, not perfect, not a straight A student all around, just kind of a mortal. Like a normal kid who kind of said to me, 'darn it, I never applied for accommodations, I want extended time and I understand that I can't get it now and it's too late. I should have gotten accommodations earlier to show that I need them, and I feel like I'm a sucker because everybody else has [accommodations] at my school.' Now, this is just hearsay, right? This is what the student said to me, okay? When the student said this to me, I thought it was pretty sad. They played by the rules, maybe they could use some time, maybe. Yeah, [the student] might have some kind of a diagnosis, I don't know, but they also just might be like a lot of us. Some of us are strong in one area and a little bit less strong in another area when it comes to academics. Does that mean if you're not strong in one area you have to have an accommodation to balance that out? I don't know, I don't think so, I think it's an overreaction. But what was sad was what they student said to me, that they felt that everyone else is gaining the advantage over them. That's what they felt and they didn't aggressively do the same and now they have this twinge of regret and man, that is so sad. [The student] has nothing to regret. I said to them, we had a conversation, I don't know if they believed me, 'you have nothing to regret, you know, you're a normal person with, again, strengths and weaknesses. Nothings broken and you're going to do fine.'

So, when you were at the other school that you used to work at, and you saw these sorts of things, how much stock did the psychologist's recommendation have and what was the high school's side of it?

So, I'll be honest, some of this might have changed. Procedures, some paper work. I left the school like 10 years ago maybe. I don't know when it arrived at the office for CollegBoard, for example, I don't know to what percentage that was weighted. What I recall is that without documentation, if it was only the school and the student alone saying, 'Hey, the school says the student needs time,' and the student says 'yeah, yeah, yeah I need time. I have [some sort of disability],' I don't think that that would fly, at all. I think there had to be some back up documentation. But, my understanding also is that if it was only [a psychologist], and there was no backup from the school saying 'so this student, we have granted them additional time, or whatever accommodation, and the student needs that' then [I think] it would make it quite difficult to go through as well.

So, you typically would need both the school and the psychologist's word on the issue?

Yeah, that's my recollection.

I left the high school in June 2013.

Do you think that there's big difference in the amount of 504 plans and IEP's received by students in public schools v private schools? Rich kids v poor kids?

You know, I don't think that my exposure to that is really broad enough to comment on that. I think it seems as though, I wouldn't necessarily [say that the difference is in] private/public, in my experience. I was saying the discrepancy is more between the more affluent areas where

students and parents have more money to pay for the tests, it can cost thousands of dollars to get a battery of testing. But its more that [these more affluent parents and kids] are more knowledgeable. There's more information about what the process is and how you navigate it. If you have to contact a doctor, what kind of doctor? Where do you do that? More of that information is being shared among those families, just, I think that's probably the way it is for a lot of healthcare in general. Other services that are more accessible to more affluent families that re not as accessible to the less affluent families. So, I see that, but I want to be really clear, in my experience I don't see a raging, distressing imbalance, but I'm working with a very small sample [size of the student population.] It would be interesting for you to talk to someone who works with more pro bono or works in a high school.

Do you know anybody like that, that I might be able to talk to? Or want to reach out to?

I don't know off the top of my head, I'm embarrassed to say. The high schools that I'm in contact with are like Beverly Hills high school which is not exactly what we're talking about. If you want to, that I think would be a very accessible way to do it, is if you contact the administrative office of WACAC, just say you're in the press and you can even drop my name. That might be an easy way for them to put you in touch with someone.

What role do you see both unethical consultants and psychologists playing in whole issue?

My understanding is that there's got to be kind of an underworld so to speak of educational psychiatrists in the same way that there is obviously what's been revealed in the consultant

industry. I don't want to point my finger only at the psychiatrists. There's probably some who are known to be giving away easy diagnoses. Do I know who they are? No. Has a family ever mentioned that to me? Never, and over the years I worked with a lot of families with a lot of means to spend on education and who were anxious to kind of help their children and nobody has even suggested that they know they're going to go to doctor so and so because that guy's got the ticket and it would be easy or something like that. Does that exist? I presume, I just don't know. Here's the thing that I think. I think its not so much that there are unethical doctors doing this, I actually think that the way these tests work and the way the process of diagnosing for accommodations [works], I think that a lot of students rightfully could use one accommodation of another. I think it's pretty common. I don't think it's an epidemic, I just think that there's something kind of built in. A lot of us could use some kind of a math thing or a reading thing. You know I just think it's just reviewing something that is accurate, the question is what to do about that. Should we be granting accommodations for people? So, I'm not sure it's that the diagnoses are wrong or unethical, I really...maybe I'm naïve, I just don't think they are. I have trust that they're being administered honestly. It's just more of a different problem about, you know?